

# Jay McInerney

It's a rare writer whose debut novel soars to the top of the commercial and critical charts and then is made into a movie. Rarer still if that writer follows up with a steady output spanning more than three decades. Jay McInerney has accomplished both feats, chronicling the New York social scene since the 1980s in such a universal way as to be called the literary voice of a generation. His latest release, *How It Ended*, a collection of short stories written over the course of his career, has received praise across the board, eliciting comparisons to Fitzgerald, O'Hara and Salinger. After battling a celebrity "bad boy" reputation that at times threatened to overshadow his work, McInerney is grateful for his current stellar reviews and the acknowledgement that he is—and always has been—a determinedly productive writer of the top ilk.

**Credits:** Seven novels, including *Bright Lights*, *Big City* (his debut) and *Brightness Falls* (his favorite); two essay collections on wine; and numerous fiction and nonfiction magazine contributions.

**Why:** I write because it's something I want to do more than anything else. When I was 14, I discovered poetry and it really knocked me out. But there comes a point where you have to figure out how to make a living. I considered law school, but getting a story accepted by *The Paris Review* was really sort of encouraging.

**Schedule:** Normally, I write about six days a week. For me, it works best if, as soon after waking up as possible, I go sit at my desk. I find that when I'm trying to figure out what a novel is about, four hours is hard work because I'm struggling. Then it comes to a point where it flows more easily. Usually in the middle, I switch to eight hours. Towards the end, I can work 12 hours a day because I'm closing in and excited.

**Focus:** Living in New York is very distracting, and [sometimes] I need to create a little bubble around myself. There have been periods where I have locked myself away—I often do that to start a novel. But there's a really scary thing about doing that. There's nothing between you and the writing, and a lot of people can't

take that. You can't fool yourself. You can't pretend you're writing.

**Revisions:** I do a fair amount of revision. I always think of something that [Raymond] Carver said to me. He said, "I really don't believe in writing; I only believe in rewriting." In his mind, you try to get any story down on paper as quickly as you can and then revise and revise and revise. I think revision is very important in [making sure] all questions are answered.

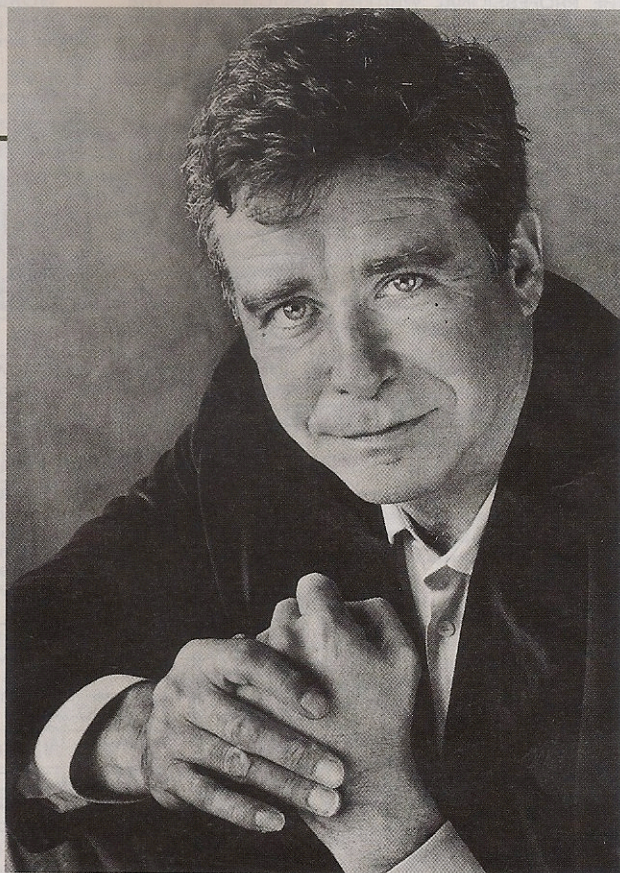
**Story vs. novel:** A story is a good way of easing your way into something and deciding whether it's a long or short narrative. Three of my novels have started as short stories. I think it must be like a painter starting with a sketch. Before you paint a giant mural, it helps to fool around with a pencil and paper and lay it out, you know?

**Celebrity:** I found a really rich source of material—the social life of New York City, a lot of it after dark. But I've had to live down the persona of the party boy—I became too much the focus of scrutiny,

and it's taken a while to get past that. For a long time, I've dealt with this sort of resentment from critics who seem to feel somehow that I had too much fun or wasn't serious because they saw my picture in magazines. But I do feel that stuff is finally fading to some extent. This [latest] book is the first time that I feel like people are really reading the work again and not holding my life against me.

**Advice:** When I was in fiction workshops, I remember times when someone would say about a story, "That just didn't seem plausible to me." And then the writer would defensively say, "Well, that really happened." You know what? That doesn't matter. That's the worst excuse you can have as a fiction writer. All kinds of accidents and coincidences and implausible twists present themselves in life, but they don't necessarily make good fiction, which needs some sort of narrative inevitability that makes sense. It's important to forget what really happened and think about what could have happened.

*Interview by Laurel-Ann Dooley, a freelance writer based in Atlanta.*



Marion Ettlinger